

## **All In the Family** St. Mark 3:20-35

All of us have or had experienced family of some kind. And, for those of us born in the 'Silent' or 'Baby Boomer' generation, the familiar concept of family is seen in greeting cards, 'Leave-It-To-Beaver' sitcoms, or in TV specials.

And, as a result of the traditional but restrictive image of the pastel colored, gentle, and humble Jesus, presented by decades of Sunday school curricula, today's gospel lesson brings us a different impression of Jesus.

Here, St. Mark shares a picture of Jesus, splashed in vibrant, florescent colors in 3-D, with behaviors and language that shock and surprise us today, just as they did his contemporaries.

In Jesus' Palestine, the family unit was everything, the cornerstone of society. The family is security. Orphans and widows are exceptionally vulnerable, because if they lose their family, they lose their protection. Then, as now, people derived their personal and social standing from their family.

In contemporary Middle Eastern culture, family honor is still major life issue. We hear news stories about the dreadful penalties to individuals, who are presumed to have brought shame on their family. Jesus 'messes' with those who are hearing him speak the truth to his immediate family, as they lost sight of his vision.

St. Mark tells us that when the family discovered the great crowds gathering to hear Jesus, "*they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'*" (v. 21) Jesus re-defines 'family' by teaching that being related by blood is not the ultimate test, but by "*whoever does the will of God*" (v. 35).

We may find it difficult to deal with what seems like a rift between Jesus and his mother and siblings. The opposition also comes from the Jewish religious leaders, who declare that Jesus is "*bonkers*." They characterize this by saying, "*He*

*has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.*" (v. 22) Both expressions of antagonism, come from the same point of irritation: Jesus is not behaving as both groups wish. He is not 'acting' like one of them.

A quick review of the preceding chapters in St. Mark's Gospel show that Jesus is indeed "different." Even after John the Baptist was arrested (1:14-15), Jesus continues to proclaim the message that the kingdom of God is here, and asks people to repent, to turn their lives around.

Jesus is accused of lots of things because he hangs with the marginalized, the poor, those who live on the wrong side of the tracks. His life is further frustrated, by the healing of lepers, and the freeing of those held by unclean spirits. He publicly restores health and mobility to those who are paralyzed, and he questions the laws related to observing the Sabbath. Complaints about him escalate to the point where Jesus is accused of being possessed by an evil force, "*Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.*"

Beelzebub is the name of an idol worshiped by Israel's long-time adversaries, the Philistines. "Beel" is a Greek form of Baal, the Canaanite god of the Hebrew Scriptures. To link this name to Jesus is to indict him of being no better than this idol.

But Jesus is not without a creative and commanding response. He spoke of a "kingdom divided against itself." Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this passage in "The Message" is helpful: "*Does it make sense to send a devil to catch a devil, to use Satan to get rid of Satan? A squabbling family disintegrates. If Satan were fighting Satan there soon wouldn't be any Satan left.*"

Jesus is saying that if he wasn't changing people's lives by the power of Satan, then it must be by the power of God. The question to his accusers then is, "why do they oppose what he is doing by calling it the work of the devil?" In verses 29-30, Jesus speaks strong words that stand in sharp contrast to the promise of forgiveness in verse 28. He declares that there is an unforgivable sin.

Back in verse 23 we read that Jesus asked his indicters, family and religious leaders alike, to hear what he has to say about the unforgivable sin, what he calls "an

eternal sin," for which there is no forgiveness, and he particularizes this in verse 30: "*for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'*" Sin against the Holy Spirit is an act of defiance against God, and in calling the work of the Holy Spirit the work of the devil, they are rejecting God by rejecting the One sent by God.

There is nothing feeble and trifling about Jesus here, or about what he is saying. The words are as jarring for us as they must have been for his mother and his siblings, and for the religious leaders. It is hard for us to hear this warning, because it makes us wonder if we have committed this unforgivable sin, of being defiantly rebellious against God.

John Mark Hicks suggests, that this does not compare to some careless comment about the Holy Spirit, or a moment of unbelief. Rather, it is an ongoing rejection of Jesus as the herald of the kingdom of God, and the Son of God.

We can be relieved to know that our wrestling over this, is an indication of the Holy Spirit's work in us. The unforgivable sin is to knowingly reject God's love and forgiveness. Turning back to the words of today's Gospel lesson, we can say that those who try to prevent God's will for healing and wholeness, are the ones who are "out of their minds" and of "an unclean spirit."

Those who join with Jesus in doing the will of God, are the new family, what the NRSV names "*The True Kindred of Jesus.*" Those who are actively and willingly living in God's Way, are the new community of faith, people who are demonstrating God's reign in the world, breaking down Satan's kingdom, by building up the kingdom of God. Alleluia. Amen.